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SUBJECT: WHY THE OPPOSITION WITHDRAWAL SURPRISED OBSERVERS

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

1. (C) Five of six major Venezuelan opposition parties withdrew from the December 4 National Assembly elections in a move that surprised political experts and international observers. The pullout was also unplanned by the parties themselves. Eleventh-hour cooperation by the National Electoral Council (CNE) ironically discouraged the opposition from participating by allowing them to see technical problems that could have jeopardized vote secrecy. In another ironic twist, a decision by opposition party Primero Justicia (PJ) to participate may have provoked other parties into withdrawing from the race. Although many party leaders favored participation, they caved to a surge of grassroots criticism after Accion Democratica pulled out November 28. The grassroots view appears to have been based on an assumption that the voting process was not secret. President Hugo Chavez said December 4 the pullout could make the parties "illegal," but it is not clear to us what this means. The election results may benefit Venezuela in the long run. The resultant one-party legislature makes Chavez appear more dictatorial while reducing the power of the most ineffective elements of the opposition. End summary.

2. (C) The eleventh-hour pullout of five of the six major Venezuelan opposition parties from the National Assembly elections during November 28 - December 3 surprised most political observers. EU observation mission leader Jose Albino Penada called the pullout a "profound surprise" at a press conference December 6. IRI and NDI officials have also told us they had no advance indication of the withdrawal. The opposition parties' lack of unity and a coherent grand strategy contributed to their pullout. Rather than planning the withdrawal, they merely reacted to events out of their control. The bickering, unprepared opposition coalition's handling of two incidents triggered a shift of internal party influence and external party tactics. Post offers below what it regards as factors contributing to the opposition's decisionmaking process.

Incident #1: The CNE Cooperates

3. (C) Concessions by the National Electoral Council (CNE) became the catalyst that launched the opposition down the road toward withdrawal.

-- First, international and domestic observers convinced the CNE to allow opposition parties access to voting software and machinery. In a critical development on November 23, opposition technicians proved to the observers their long-held belief that it was possible to cross data from fingerprint and voting machines to determine each person's vote. They also highlighted other possibilities of using the voting machines to detect how people voted. The opposition reacted with outrage because its worst fears were proven.

-- After initially rebuffing opposition demands, the CNE agreed November 28 to take the fingerprint machines off-line, although it said they would be used in future elections. Some opposition members convincingly argue that the removal of the fingerprint machines was a good thing, but that there were a number of other methods of triangulating data from the voting machines to discover how people voted, particularly since it was proven that the voting machines retained vote sequence in its flash memory.

Incident #2: Primero Justicia Announces it Will Run

4. (C) Shortly after the CNE decision to take the fingerprint machines off-line November 28, Primero Justicia (PJ) secretary general Gerardo Blyde called the decision a victory for the opposition--effectively claiming credit for forcing the CNE's hand--and said his party would participate in the elections. That night, the OAS electoral observation mission issued a press release congratulating the opposition and CNE for working together to guarantee transparency. Minutes later, Globovision announced Accion Democratica (AD)

planned to withdraw from the election. (Embassy note: PJ's unilateral decision appears to have angered the other parties, and their disjointed reaction snowballed into the withdrawal of most of the opposition. Officials from other parties have often complained to us that PJ is an opportunistic media darling; they are also jealous that PJ continues to receive campaign funds while their own party coffers shrink.)

Power Shift: Accion Democratica Precedent Empowers Parties' Rank-and-File

15. (C) With the exception of a few minor parties and groupings, most opposition parties were still planning to run as of late November, although some elements of each party favored non-participation. Most party leaders, especially in "traditional" parties like AD and the Christian Democrats (COPEI), probably advocated participation because they stood to give up strong chances of winning legislative seats. A few party leaders opposed abstention on strategic grounds. Incorrectly suspecting that Washington favored a pullout by opposition parties, COPEI international relations secretary Sadio Garavini lectured poloff November 22 that non-participation never worked.

16. (C) Nonetheless, these parties appear to have been in a reactive mode rather than following any formulated strategy. Although opposition party leaders tend to rule by decree, in this case they appear to have had their hands forced by an avalanche of internal pressure. AD secretary general Henry Ramos Allup appears to have judged, based on internal AD dynamics as well as the broader picture, that he could not politically afford to be upstaged by Primero Justicia. In early November, he blocked a challenger from running for AD secretary general. Ramos Allup already had a reputation

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among some grassroots party elements of being willing to negotiate with Chavismo. In addition, some members of AD's National Executive Council had begun advocating non-participation, an assistant to former Coordinadora Democratica leader Enrique Mendoza told us November 29.

17. (C) After AD's pullout, other parties were similarly embarrassed into withdrawing. Some held impromptu closed-door strategy sessions. Others overturned announced decisions to stay in the race.

-- Zulia State's opposition Governor Manuel Rosales was well positioned in his state. He held a march in support of Zulian electoral candidates November 30 and declared his Un Nuevo Tiempo party's plans to participate. He then set himself apart from the pack somewhat by delivering a compromise position advocating reconciliation. Rosales demanded December 1 that elections be postponed and a high-level commission be established to seek a solution to the "crisis." President Hugo Chavez rejected the offer the same day, calling Rosales a "coward" and "coup plotter." A local television host and member of Rosales' coalition told us Rosales was confronting strong internal party pressure to withdraw. Faced with the possibility of winning in Zulia but losing the national popularity he would need next year as a possible presidential candidate, Rosales announced his party's withdrawal December 3.

-- In another unexpected turn of events, PJ reversed its decision to participate on November 30. PJ is one of the few parties with strategic goals, including that of distinguishing itself from its discredited fellow opposition parties. Still, PJ pulled out the day after crowds gathered around the offices of PJ mayor Leopoldo Lopez shouting, "withdraw!"

Tactical Shift: Parties Left With No One to Blame

18. (C) The parties probably recognized they would either have to pull out or face losing with no one to blame but themselves. If the CNE had not made the election day concessions, these parties could have once again participated and then cried foul after losing. Instead, they remained determined to wash their hands of their performance up to the last minute. Party statements justifying withdrawal continued to cite technical problems even though the CNE had agreed to remove both fingerprint machines and electronic notebooks from the polls. Many members remained deeply disturbed, however, by the fact that evidence suggested the GOV could monitor how people voted.

What Next?

19. (SBU) Chavez warned on election day that parties could be branded illegal as well as illegitimate. The legal basis for that claim is not clear to us. According to a 1964 law on political parties, parties can not be dissolved without the consent of their members unless they fail to participate in two consecutive elections. Nonetheless, if parties do not receive at least one percent of the vote in "national elections," they have to reregister during the following calendar year by collecting signatures of 0.5 percent of the electoral registry. (Embassy note: Unregistered parties may be hard pressed to get signatures. Many citizens already fear persecution for appearing on the "Tascon list" for signing the presidential recall petition and on the "Maisanta program" for having voted against Chavez.) The law is not clear which elections the parties can count to present their results. If parties are allowed to use vote totals from the August 2005 municipal elections, Post calculates that AD, COPEI, PJ, and Movimiento al Socialismo will make the cut. Proyecto Venezuela and UNT will not.

110. (SBU) Chavez, however, could avoid trouble by applying the law selectively or by disavowing it entirely as a relic of the Fourth Republic. (One PJ official said he "hoped to God" Chavez outlawed his party, which he thought would paint Chavez as even more autocratic.) As of December 8, press reports speculated that the GOV had not yet released the final election results because several GOV-aligned parties did not receive the votes needed to remain registered. According to preliminary results released by the CNE, only six of the 17 Chavez-aligned parties announced to have won seats received at least two percent of the vote. Similarly, only six pro-GOV parties received more than one percent in August.

Comment

111. (C) In sum, the opposition pullout, like most opposition decisions, appears to have been both uncoordinated and unplanned. This does not mean, however, that some members of the opposition were not pushing for non-participation all along. The opposition parties' policy reversals apparent in a chronology drafted by Post further show that the opposition was ill prepared to react to the unfolding events. Governor Rosales said this development "suits neither the government nor the opposition nor anyone." He is right on two scores. First, with the Chavez administration in control of all seats, it will look to outside observers more like Cuba or Saddam's Iraq than a functioning democracy. Second, this may be the deathblow for a number of opposition parties, which were already running on financial fumes. Who, then, is the big winner here? If this incident marginalizes the opposition's leadership dinosaurs and the grassroots retains its voice, Venezuela may be, at least in the long run.

112. (U) Post will fax chronology separately to department.

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